

HUD Black History Showcase Series

Colin Powell
1937 - -

Born in Harlem, New York City, to Jamaican immigrants, Powell became the first African-American to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1989-1993) and Secretary of State.

Powell spent most of his childhood in the South Bronx, an ordinary student throughout high school. At City College of New York, he discovered himself, a success in the Army's Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC). Following graduation in 1958, he was assigned to Army duty in West Germany. In 1962, he returned to the United States, to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, where he met and married Alma Johnson.

Powell's next overseas assignment was South Vietnam, where he was wounded in action. He then studied at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. During a second tour in Vietnam he received the Soldier's Medal for pulling several men from a burning helicopter.

Powell then attended George Washington University, earning a Master's degree in business administration in 1971. He then worked as an analyst at the Pentagon, after which he was appointed as a White House Fellow in the Office of Management and Budget. Subsequently, Powell was assigned to South Korea in 1973 to command a battalion troubled by racial animosities.

After additional service in Washington and an assignment as a brigade commander in the 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell, Kentucky, he returned to Washington in the late 1970's, working in the Pentagon and the Department of Energy.

In 1987 Powell became National Security Adviser, a post he held for the duration of the Reagan administration. Following election of President George H.W. Bush, Powell was promoted to full general and assumed charge of the Army's Forces Command. He was nominated by President Bush in 1989 to become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's most prestigious military position. He was the first African-American officer to hold this post.

As Chair of the JCS, Powell was key in formulating plans in 1989 to eliminate the corrupt Noriega regime in Panama. Adding to his fame was his role in the first stages of Operation Desert Shield, in 1990. Powell subsequently helped lead to victory in the Gulf War, along with field commander General H. Norman Schwarzkopf. Both were awarded a congressional gold medal.

As the youngest man to serve as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Powell would have ample opportunity to accomplish even more should he choose to remain in public service. His name had even been mentioned in connection with the vice presidency by both liberals and conservatives.

As Secretary of State, Powell remains active and in high visibility in government. He was nominated for this position by President George W. Bush in 2000 and was unanimously confirmed by the U.S. Senate.